

Equality and Cooperation

Finland's Path to Excellence



BY JUKKA SARJALA

For the past decade, Finland has been lauded for consistently being a top performer on international assessments of student achievement. Having spent 25 years in the Ministry of Education, and then another 8 as director general of the National Board of Education, I am heartened by these accomplishments—but I am also concerned about how they are being interpreted by policymakers around the world. Much has been written about what we did from the mid-1960s to the early 2000s; the mechanics of our transformation have been

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well documented. Much less has been written about our values. But those values not only determine the overall shape of the reforms, they also sustain broad support when problems arise, guide day-to-day decisions, and ensure that all of the pieces—from curriculum to teacher preparation to assessment to budget allocations—fit together.

So, what are those core values? Equality and cooperation. Equality in opportunities *and* outcomes is what drives the first nine years of schooling. The national core curriculum for those nine years is challenging, but only about 4 percent of special education students attend separate schools. The rest have the capacity to be on grade level—as long as we provide expert teaching, intensive supports, and frequent remediation, as well as health and welfare services. This brings me to cooperation. Cooperation is what makes equality possible. Teachers, principals, counselors, parents, university professors, medical professionals, the teachers'

union, government officials, and students themselves all have roles to play, and all support each other.

Excellence was a result, never an objective, much less a core value. But excellence comes from working together—for decades—to ensure that all children are well educated.

What is impressive about Finland's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results is not that we provide a high-quality education, but that we provide an education that is both high quality and high equality.* To me, one of the most interesting findings of the 2009 PISA[†] (which focused on literacy, but also assessed mathematics and science, among 15-year-olds in 75 countries and regions) is this: while the average achievement level is quite high in Finland, the gap between high and low performers is relatively small.¹ The achievement gap between students from high- and low-income families is also relatively small.² (Finland also demonstrated excellence and equity on PISA in 2000, 2003, and 2006.)³

Perhaps even more important, PISA has revealed that the differences between schools in Finland are quite small.⁴ It is of little consequence where students live and which school they attend. The opportunities to learn are virtually the same all over the country. The same kind of comprehensive basic education truly is provided to all students.

War Brings Clarity

Finland, a small country in northern Europe, is bordered by Sweden, Norway, and Russia, with Estonia just across the Gulf of Finland. Our small size and lack of major natural resources reinforce our cultural and philosophical commitment to equality. For us, equality is an economic necessity: the education system must be efficient to develop all talent reserves from all social classes and groups.

This necessity was especially clear at the end of World War II. In its peace treaty with the Soviet Union, Finland lost 10 percent of its arable land and forest resources, 12 percent of its total area, 13 percent of its national wealth, and 20 percent of its railway network. Finland's postwar social policy began in 1945 with the extensive measures taken to make living arrangements for returning soldiers and the roughly 12 percent of the population evacuating the territory taken by the Soviet Union.

Given this desperate situation, the Finns started building their country's future with two goals: securing independence and democracy, and building a welfare state that provides equal opportunities to all. Then and now, Finns agree that the main goals of social welfare are to prevent social problems; to assist those who are sick, elderly, or otherwise in need; and to encourage people's independence and initiative. The expansion of the welfare state was made possible by the country's economic progress: in the period from the early 1950s to the end of the 1980s, gross domestic product (GDP) grew, on average, by over 3 percent per year. By 1990, Finland's GDP per capita was the sixth highest in

Europe (below Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Sweden, and Switzerland).⁵ It remains quite high today.⁶

A major factor in Finland's rise from poverty after WWII was the efforts made by trade unions and employers' organizations to minimize labor unrest and conflict. Cooperation was a skill they learned, and came to revere, during WWII. To avoid any slowdowns in production, Finland's employers' organizations issued a declaration in which they acknowledged the legitimacy of the trade unions and accepted the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions as an equal negotiating partner in labor market issues. This declaration was a turning point in Finnish history. It came soon after the Soviet Union invaded Finland at the end of 1939 (in what's known as the Winter War), and was essential to Finland's self-defense. Not only did the employee-employer unity help Finland remain independent, it solidified Finns' commitment to working out agreements.

After WWII, the situation in the labor market could have been

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very volatile if we had not had this wartime first step toward our modern agreement-oriented society. The severely war-torn nation needed peace in labor relations to recover and prosper. Those involved in politics focused on increasing the national product *and* on attaining social justice and equality. Conflicts continued to arise, but the underlying commitment to cooperation also continued to grow. Today, trade unions and employers' organizations are true social partners in Finland's national, social, and economic development.

But I'm jumping ahead. To create a modern industrial society, Finland had to figure out what its commitment to equality and cooperation, and its economic necessity of continuing to increase GDP, meant for education policy.

Aiming for Equality

Until the 1970s, Finland's only educational accomplishment was a very high level of literacy. But one could easily argue that the credit for that should go to the church, not the education system. The Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century introduced the idea of vernacular education and the first Finnish-language ABC book. In the 1680s, the Lutheran Church decreed that the people be taught to read so that they could familiarize themselves with the Bible. By the end of the 19th century, the Finnish people were among the most literate in the world.

So, the education system had a good foundation to build on,

*PISA results are emphasized here because PISA provides extensive information on educational equity. However, it is important to note that Finland also is a top-performing country on PIRLS (the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; see www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013010.pdf) and TIMSS (the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study; see www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013009_1.pdf and www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013009_2.pdf).

[†]PISA tested students in 2012, but the results will not be available until the end of 2013.

but it was mediocre due to faulty thinking about students' abilities. After just four years of schooling, pupils were divided into two different streams of education. One provided primarily academic, theoretical subjects, while the other was practical and task-oriented. As the person charged with overseeing the dismantling of this two-stream system, I can flatly state that it had several moral and economic weaknesses:

1. Students had to make the choice that determined their career options at the age of 11. Such an early age is absolutely unsuitable for this decision.
2. Basic education was arbitrarily divided into two packages of different scopes and contents.
3. This inherently unequal system was made even worse by unfair distribution of resources: not only were the schools that provided better opportunities for further learning concentrated in towns, the supply of openings was insufficient.

To remedy all these weaknesses, radical school reform was necessary. After a lengthy political debate, the Finnish Parliament adopted the law on comprehensive school at the end of the 1960s. Although the parliamentary decision was more or less unanimous, there was a remarkable amount of skepticism in the mass media and among politicians as to where this reform might lead. The opponents of reform argued that the overall skill level would drop because the whole age group would never meet the expected standard.

But the two-stream system was fundamentally unacceptable. In a democratic society, it is not tolerable for the basic civilization to depend on division into classes. Furthermore, the composition of each school must be similar to the structure of the whole society. It is very important that children from different social classes become accustomed to meeting each other in the common school.

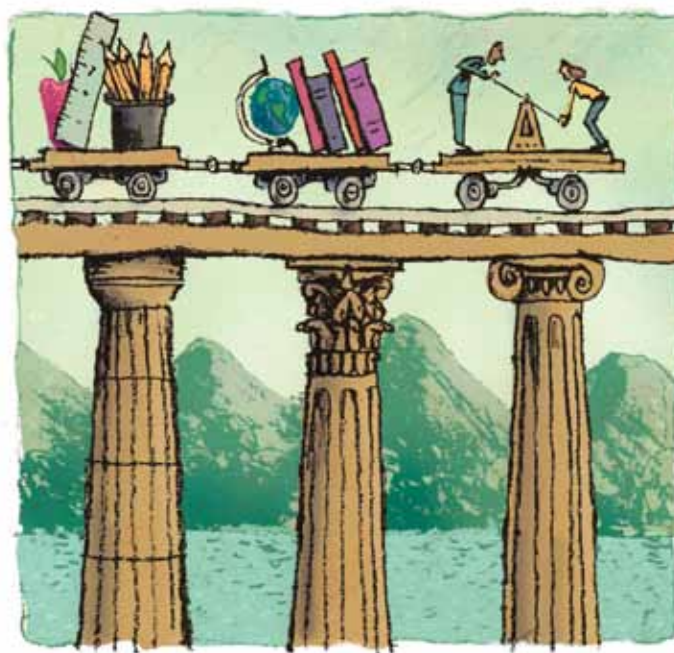
In the 1970s, the two-stream system was replaced with *peruskoulu*, a nine-year compulsory, common school. To help make the transition to the common, comprehensive school, a detailed national curriculum for primary and secondary education was developed—with the help of hundreds of expert teachers—in the late 1960s. Textbooks were approved by central administration. The teaching process, including its contents and targets, were centrally determined. Even then, there was no US-style testing system, but we did have an inspection system. In addition, we made the transition slowly, starting in the early 1970s in the sparsely populated northern part of the country, and taking several years to bring *peruskoulu* south.

Today, virtually all students—more than 99 percent—complete *peruskoulu*. During the first six years, instruction is usually given by a generalist elementary teacher, who teaches all or almost all of the subjects. Then, during the last three years, the different subjects are taught by specialized subject teachers. For children, teaching, educational equipment (textbooks, for example), and welfare services (including health, dental, and counseling services) are free of charge. In addition, pupils get one free warm meal a day. As a rule, transportation is arranged by the municipality for distances of three miles or more.

For the most part, all pupils during the first six years receive the same academic content and teaching. In the last three years, the curriculum includes common subjects and some optional

subjects freely chosen by the pupils. Optional studies may include courses in, for instance, foreign languages, sports, and art and music, or integrated, in-depth courses or applied studies in the common subjects. Students also have the option of attending *peruskoulu* for a 10th year.

Despite the concerns raised when we created *peruskoulu*, now there are very few grade repeaters in Finland. Why? First, repeating a grade means extra costs for the school and is inefficient. Most pupils have at least one strong subject, so it is unnecessary to repeat all subjects. Second, repeating can be embarrassing; when it turns students into reluctant learners, it is counterproductive. To avoid the need for grade repetition, pupils are given the necessary support all through the school year in those subjects that they find difficult to learn.



Since our goal is equality of outcomes, *peruskoulu* is for each child; it must adjust to the needs of each child. While *peruskoulu* began with a detailed national curriculum (which was helpful during such a radical transformation of the school system), it soon became clear that teaching heterogeneous groups requires expertise and flexibility. In the 1980s, teacher preparation was made much more rigorous, and then in the early 1990s, a profound change in curricular philosophy and practice took place. The national curriculum was changed to be more flexible and less detailed, and students in the middle and upper grades were given more optional subjects. And, the national textbook approval process and the inspection system were both abolished. Now, we have a school-based, teacher-planned curriculum (guided by the national curriculum framework) along with student-oriented instruction, counseling, and remedial teaching. With all these supports, Finnish teachers set high standards for all students. Even on the primary level, teachers stress the importance of demanding cognitive aims.

After completing *peruskoulu*, approximately 95 percent of students voluntarily continue on to upper-secondary education—either general or vocational. About half of the students opt for

general upper-secondary education. Since 1982, instruction in these schools has been divided not by grade levels, but by courses, with each course consisting of about 38 lessons. Consequently, pressures for all students to proceed at the same pace have been eliminated. The school year is usually divided into five or six periods. A separate timetable is drawn up for each period, concentrating on certain subjects. These courses are designed to take three years, but progress in studies is individual. While some students are able to finish in two years, others take four years. This is just one more example of our pursuit of equal results. Students do differ—some are faster than others, some have more responsibilities outside of school than others—but all can succeed if the education system is designed to provide real opportunities.

At the end of upper-secondary school, students may take a matriculation examination that is used for university admissions. The matriculation examination is drawn up nationally, and there is a centralized autonomous body to check its individual tests according to uniform criteria. Students must take tests in at least four subjects; one of them is obligatory for everybody: the mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish, or Sami). For their three other tests, students may choose from a second national language (Swedish or Finnish), a first foreign language (mainly English), mathematics, and general studies.

In the vocational upper-secondary schools, training in practically all occupational fields is offered to students ages 16 to 19. Vocational education and training cover seven sectors of economic life, including 112 different study programs. Every student must spend at least half a year at a real workplace engaged in on-the-job learning.

Although the upper-secondary options sound divided, it is possible to move from vocational to general academic studies (and vice versa). Such movement is also possible in higher education, as Finland has both universities and polytechnics offering a range of degrees.

Succeeding through Cooperation

Two government agencies oversee education: the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education. The ministry is responsible for education policies, including preparing legislation for parliament and negotiating budget allocations for education. The board is responsible for policy implementation. It is an expert body responsible for the development of educational objectives, contents, and methods, which it codifies in the national core curricula it develops for the different types of schools. The board also evaluates outcomes.

Although there is no student testing similar to the accountability-focused testing done in the United States, Finland conducts studies to enhance educational quality. Since 1998, the National Board of Education has completed two such evaluation projects. These national evaluations were designed to produce information about the quality, content, and outcomes of education and vocational training in light of the objectives of society, work, and the individual. Instead of testing all students, representative samples (about 5–10 percent of students) are tested. Information is also gathered about schools as learning environments and students' learning abilities and motivations.

Finland's municipalities (there are no US-style state-level governments) are responsible for running the peruskoulu and upper-

secondary schools. Education funding is divided between the central government and the municipalities. The original idea was that the central government subsidy would be, on average, 57 percent of the costs while the municipal contribution would average 43 percent, but the share of municipal funding has increased in recent years.* In addition to the schools, the municipalities are responsible for hospitals, health centers, and social welfare. This is important because the national core curriculum obliges municipalities and schools to cooperate with social and health authorities, especially in pupil welfare matters.

This overview of the education system's structure is helpful, but what really matters is how all the different individuals and groups work together. We share the goals of equal opportunity and equal results—and we know such lofty goals can only be accomplished through cooperation.

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cal parties and one party can work to take power from the other, Finland has a multiparty democracy that makes collaboration and compromise essential. Therefore, just as educational equality is an economic necessity, cooperation throughout the education sector is a political necessity.

Fortunately, since the development of peruskoulu, there has been an exceptionally broad cultural and political consensus about the main lines of national education policy. We believe in equality, and our PISA results tell us that our cooperative approach to child development and well-being is working.

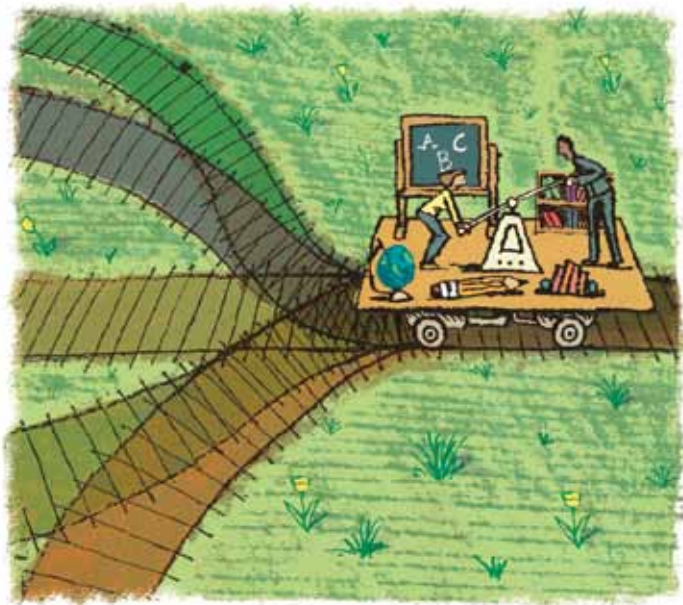
Unions as Partners

As discussed earlier, unions have been recognized since WWII as partners in national development. Today, Finland has one of the highest rates of union membership in the industrialized world, with 70 percent of employees organized in trade unions.⁷ Unlike in the United States, in Finland unions of highly educated professionals are quite common. A large central organization of such unions—the Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff—has affiliates in many different fields, including architects, doctors, lawyers, professors, scientists, officers, priests, nurses, and teachers. With its small size, multiparty government, and high unionization rate, Finland is a negotiation society.

*For citizens to get equal welfare services, the national government subsidizes the municipalities. In the poorest municipalities, the government subsidies are the greatest source of income, greater than their tax levy from the residents.

The unions for all types of trades are active participants in policymaking. They submit recommendations to the government and parliament concerning employment and social affairs, education and training, taxation, energy policy, and the evolution of work and business life. Employers, employees, and government officials agree that it is better to all sit around the same negotiating table than to have a crisis in the labor market.

Finland's teachers' union, the Trade Union of Education, is especially strong. There used to be several teachers' unions; about three decades ago they merged, multiplying their political importance and bargaining power. Although membership is voluntary, over 95 percent of teachers belong to the teachers' union. All types



of teachers belong to the same organization: teachers responsible for daycare, in peruskoulu, in upper-secondary schools, in vocational schools, and in adult education. (The only exception is university professors, although many university lecturers are members of the teachers' union.) Those studying to become teachers and retired teachers also belong to the union. What is exceptional to many outside observers is that headmasters also belong to the teachers' union. In Finland, headmasters are all former teachers—and in the smaller schools, many still retain some teaching duties.

With such a high membership rate, the teachers' union is obviously powerful, but it is also very highly respected and welcomed in policymaking. For decades, ministers of education have, without fail, understood that carrying out a reform will be infinitely easier if the experts from the teachers' union have been involved in the preparatory work for the reform.

Beyond this practical concern, in Finland's cooperative culture it is customary to have education policy matters decided upon collectively. When a reform is proposed, the minister of education normally appoints a committee in which all parties that will be touched by the reform are represented. In general, the representatives from the teachers' union and municipalities are called upon, and representatives of parents and student organizations are invited to participate.

Ongoing communication and cooperation are built into the policymaking structure: the National Board of Education has a board of advisors whose members are appointed by the national government for a term of four years. For its entire existence, the board of advisors has included representation from the teachers' union and the municipalities.

Cooperation between policymakers and the union may be facilitated by the fact that while policy happens on the national level, teachers are employed by—and the union negotiates with—the municipalities. But even these negotiations happen in a collaborative structure with a cooperative mindset. Instead of each municipality negotiating a local contract, the municipalities have an organization, the Commission for Local Authority Employers, that engages in collective bargaining with the teachers' union, resulting in the "Municipal Collective Agreement." This fact has great significance in principle and practice. Dialogue between the ministry and the teachers' union mainly touches issues that have to do with the provision and content of education. If the teachers' union and the ministry had to negotiate about both pay and education policy, it is unlikely that the two would cooperate as well and as openly as they do now.

At the same time, there is a connection between reforms in education policy and teachers' pay. Changes may add to teachers' workloads or alter their professional requirements. So it is only natural that, prior to implementing the reforms, there has to be an agreement as to how the new requirements will be accounted for in their pay. *If there is no such agreement, the reform will not be introduced.*

Across Finland, teachers and administrators, as well as union officials and policymakers, share a concern about our learning results and especially about the welfare of our children. All regard the support and guidance needed by students in learning and in their personal development as vital. We want our schools to be academically inspiring and demanding, while at the same time safe, friendly, and caring. If Finland holds any lessons for the United States, the main one would be this: when everyone cooperates to achieve equality, inequality can be dramatically reduced and excellence can be attained. □

Endnotes

1. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do—Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science*, vol. 1 (Paris: OECD, 2010), 14; and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background—Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*, vol. 2 (Paris: OECD, 2010), 28.
2. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background*, 32.
3. See Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World; Executive Summary* (Paris: OECD, 2007); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Learning for Tomorrow's World—First Results from PISA 2003* (Paris: OECD, 2004); and Jouni Valijarvi, Pirjo Linnakyla, Pekka Kupari, Pasi Reinikainen, and Inga Arffman, *The Finnish Success in PISA—And Some Reasons Behind It: PISA 2000* (Jyväskylä, Finland: Institute for Educational Research, 2002).
4. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Lessons from PISA for the United States: Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education* (Paris: OECD, 2011), 118.
5. World Bank, "GDP per capita (current US\$)," 1988–1992, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?page=4>.
6. World Bank, "GDP per capita (current US\$)," 2008–2012, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.
7. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and Jelle Visser, "Trade Union Density," ICTWSS database (Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts, 1960–2010), version 3.0, <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=20167>.